

Robins, S.K. (2016). Book Review: *Memory: A History* (D. Nikulin, Ed.). *Memory Studies*, 9(3), 358–360. doi: 10.1177/1750698016645437

***Memory: A History*, edited by Dmitri Nikulin. Oxford University Press (2015).**

Book Review

Sarah K. Robins

The aim of this collected volume, as stated in Nikulin’s introduction, is to provide an answer to the question *what is memory?* by looking at its history. He adds to this a second, supplementary aim: to explain *why* memory currently enjoys such prominence as an area of research and inquiry. These remarks are part of an inspiring and ambitious introduction to a book well worth reading. The text does not, explicitly, provide an answer to either question, but the exploration of *what* memory might be provides such a rich and nuanced picture of memory as to obviate an answer to the latter *why* question. The book is not without its limitations, primarily regarding the scope of its coverage, as I will detail later in my review. This failing is not, however, one that can be attributed to the volume alone. That a comprehensive account of memory’s history cannot be accomplished in a single volume reflects, primarily, how much work on the nature of memory is yet to be done.

Following the format specified by Oxford’s *Philosophical Concepts* series, the book contains a series of eight chapters tracing stages in the history of our concept of memory, with seven shorter ‘reflection’ pieces interleaved. These reflections are written from outside philosophy and, as stated by the series editor, are intended to highlight connections between the philosophical study of memory and memory’s role in other fields such as art, literature, culture, and the sciences. The reflections do succeed in highlighting various intersections between these fields, however, the overall effect is to make an otherwise well-ordered volume seem haphazard. Nikulin’s own introduction divides the text’s contents into three areas—the study of memory’s role in philosophy of mind, art, and cultural studies—which I will use to organize my discussion of the volume’s contents below. This will, inevitably, require neglecting the subtler points contained in many of the entries, but should serve as further encouragement for exploring the volume oneself.

The vast majority of entries in this volume concern the philosophy of mind, broadly construed. It is the central theme of six of the volume’s eight chapters, as well as three of its seven reflections. Nikulin himself writes the book’s first chapter on memory’s role in *ancient philosophy*, tracing its emergence as a philosophical concept in Plato to the first full-fledged theory of memory as presented in Aristotle. Throughout, Nikulin draws connections between theoretical exploration of memory’s foibles and practical attempts to develop mnemonics, as seen in the Sophists. Particularly enjoyable is his discussion of Plotinus’ interpretation of memory and the argument against a physical understanding of memory’s impressions. Müller’s chapter on *medieval philosophy* positions memory as a central concept for understanding the Middle Ages. The chapter itself makes good on this proclamation, tracing memory’s role in the writings of Augustine, Avicenna, Averroes, Albert the Great, and Thomas Aquinas. Müller challenges the standard view of how Plato

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and Aristotle's views shaped theories of memory in the medieval period, demonstrating the various ways in which the clash between the Platonic view of the intellect and the naturalized, Aristotelian view of the was reconciled in the thinkers of this period. Given this frame, Müller's chapter provides a nice echo of the themes in Nikulin's prior entry.

Clucas' chapter on *renaissance and early modern philosophy* breaks with the two prior, in that he offers a definitive thesis—specifically, Clucas argues that, across this period, memory evolved from a sensitive faculty to a function of the intellect. Clucas draws evidence for this claim from the philosophical dictionaries of the renaissance and the tools for rhetoric advocated by Ramus and Melanchthon. The aim of this chapter appears to influence the philosophers from the early modern period that Clucas incorporates. He focuses primarily on Descartes, Hobbes, Alsted, and Locke, emphasizing their collective fascination with memory's instantiation in the brain and its role in supporting the nature of cognition.

Clucas' thesis also provides an implicit bridge to the three remaining chapters on memory's role in philosophy of mind, which can be understood as distinct routes via which the understanding of memory as an intellectual capacity of memory has been further developed. Nuzzo's chapter on *German philosophy* provides a compelling account of how the intellectual capacity of memory becomes a vehicle for self-reflection in the writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Novallis, Hegel, Schlegel, Hölderin. Nuzzo's discussion nicely illustrates the way in which memory shifts from being understood as the grounding for subjectivity and consciousness to the basis for the absolute and for history itself. The chapter on memory in *continental philosophy*, provided by de Warren, continues this historical development in the more recent works of Nietzsche, Bergson, Husserl, Heidegger, Deleuze, and Derrida. Memory's metaphors loom large for these thinkers, and de Warren illustrates well the interplay of these metaphors with the concept of memory employed by each theorist. His inclusion of experimental work on memory in the late 19th and early 20th century—particularly the research of Ebbinghaus and Semon—comes as a surprise, but is nicely integrated with the chapter's main themes.

Bernecker's chapter on memory's role in *analytic philosophy* develops a distinct thread of research on memory, but one that can also be understood as arising out of the intellectual characterization of memory in the early modern period as provided by Clucas. As Bernecker illustrates, the analytic tradition has explored memory's intellectual functions by considering its various types, and its relation to knowledge and personal identity.

Issues pertaining to memory and the philosophy of mind are central to three of the volume's reflections as well. Chen's reflection on the role of forgetfulness in Daoism identifies ways the order or priority between remembering and forgetting in Daoist thought challenges the priority of retention in many Western views. Forgetting is the force that leads to self-discovery, the process by which one ceases to be influenced and manipulated by outside sources. This reflection feels out of place, both in its location

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between the chapters on *renaissance and early modern philosophy* and *classical German philosophy* and as the sole entry concerned with non-Western ideas.

Zaretsky's reflection on Freud's view of memory fits well in its place, appearing after de Warren's chapter on *continental philosophy*. Zaretsky's portrayal of Freud perpetuates the intermingling of memory and the transmission of social and cultural ideas as emerged in de Warren's discussion, and also nicely anticipates work on the various unconscious aspects of memory as it develops in Bernecker's *analytic philosophy* chapter. Schacter's reflection on contemporary psychology's characterization of memory as a constructive process is a fascinating foray into this view that now predominates empirical research into memory. Although Schacter pitches the view as a relatively recent development, tracing its origins to Frederic Bartlett's work in the early 20th century, several of the volume's chapters (implicitly) challenge this characterization. Müller's depiction of Albert the Great's view of memory looks highly constructive, as do many of the views from Nuzzo's survey of *classic German philosophy*, to name only a few. The possibility of such connections makes evident the ways in which this volume can serve as a great resource to memory scholars.

Memory's role in the trajectory of art is captured primarily in three of the volume's early reflections, which cover the memorialization of Greece in Roman Art, the influence of visual memory on the artistic work of Villard de Honnecourt, and the role of photographic memory in Proust's *Recherche*. These reflections are built into the structure of books in Oxford's *Philosophical Concepts* series, but their importance to the current volume is difficult to assess since many of its chapters already include discussion of artistic and cultural uses of memory from their respective period.

Two chapters focus on memory's role in cultural studies. Rothberg's chapter on *trauma, memory, and the holocaust* explores the intersections of these three concepts in a memoir of a young child's experiences at Auschwitz. Rothberg offers a compelling discussion of these issues, but the entry is short and less systematic than the other chapters. It is more similar in focus to the volume's reflections, adding to the feeling that the volume is disorganized. Assmann's chapter on *cultural memory* offers a thorough and captivating discussion of various roles memory plays in culture, providing an especially helpful discussion of the differences between communicative and cultural memory. This chapter is nicely paired with Honneth's reflection on *collective memory*, which further explores the role of memory beyond the individual.

As demonstrated by this review of its contents, the volume covers considerable ground. Still, its presentation of memory's history leaves many gaps. There are gaps within the periods the volume intends to survey. This is most apparent, for example, in the entry on *renaissance and early modern philosophy*, where there is no mention of either David Hume or Thomas Reid. The more troubling gap comes from the volume's focus on memory's role in Western philosophy. As the reflection on Daoism makes clear, memory places an important role in Chinese philosophy, which would seem to provide warrant for at least a

Penultimate Draft – please contact me before citing, skrobins@ku.edu

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chapter on these broader ideas. The Islamic philosophers Avicenna and Averroes feature in the chapter on *medieval* philosophy, but earlier works by Al-Kindî and Razi are not covered. There is no mention at all of Indian philosophy, even though memory plays a key role in providing evidence of consciousness during dreamless sleep in both the Yoga and Vedānta schools of thought.

Even with its limited focus, *Memory: A History* manages to provide a survey of this concept with broad resources. Regardless of which disciplinary orientation one brings to this volume, you are likely to be exposed to new views, quotations, metaphors, and puzzles about memory. In this way, the book has done a remarkable service to the future of memory studies—providing a resource whose perusal is sure to spark further research into the nature of memory and its history.